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ABSTRACT

Suggestions are made to help members and secretaries of committees to understand their involvement in decision-making in higher education and to assist in the development of skills that will enable them to perform their roles more effectively. A committee is defined as a body to which a particular task is committed. Why committees are used and who members of committees are, are discussed. Also examined are committee procedures, committee servicing, agenda preparation, apparent disasters, report writing, and minutes. (SPG)

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Occassional Paper 3

Making Academic Decisions in Committee

Harriet Greenaway

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MAKING ACADEMIC DECISIONS IN COMMITTEES

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MAKING ACADEMIC DECISIONS IN COMMITTEES

1 It is commonly believed in higher education institutions that academic decisions should reflect the interests and wishes of those involved with the result that committees are used extensively where corporate decisions are required. Institutions of any reasonable size are normally structured in such a way as to provide for some decisions to be made locally and for some, affecting the whole institution, to be centralized. Some decisions may be made by individuals eg heads of departments, course tutors, director or vice-chancellor and are normally made within policies which have been agreed by bodies on which appropriate interests are represented. The health of the institution depends to a great extent on the confidence with which decision-makers, be they individuals or committees, have that their decisions will be acceptable to the members of the institution. Acceptance and efficient implementation of decisions are more likely to be achieved if people have a chance to influence those decisions and the decisions are seen to be openly arrived at through constitutional channels known and understood by all affected.

2 The making of decisions by an individual, while it may be difficult for that individual himself to do, is fairly easy for other people to understand. It is less easy for committees both to make decisions and to have their role and procedure understood by others. Even more complicated is recognition and comprehension of the living

social activity which happens in a group called a committee. Perception of the social psychology of a committee assists the members and secretary to play their parts fully and efficiently - and even to enjoy meetings!

3 These notes attempt to help members and secretaries of committees to understand their involvement in making decisions in higher education and, by that comprehension, to assist in the development of skills which will enable them to perform their roles more effectively.

What is a committee?

4 The original sense of the word was 'a person to whom something was committed' and referred particularly to the care of lunatics. Leaving aside the question of madness (and there is many a committee which occasionally displays moments of it) the original definition remains fundamental. A committee is a body to which a particular task is committed. It has specific authority but its interests are confined. This limited authority is given in its terms of reference. It may do those things which are within its terms of reference but it may not concern itself with anything outside them.

5 A committee is a mechanism for making decisions: it is part of a process. It cannot operate in isolation from other parts of the decision-making system; nor will the system be efficient without the effective work of committees translating random information and ideas into structured decisions which can be implemented by people who accept them.

6 A committee consists of more than one person. It is a group of people brought together formally to discuss topics within its terms of reference and to make particular kinds of decisions as a result. In order to be the body entrusted with the discharge of the functions specified in the terms of reference the composition of the committee must be

specified. This may be by category or membership or may consist of named individuals as is normal with Royal Commissions.

7 Committees vary in the extent of their power but whatever their formal functions they exist to make decisions. The decisions are not always easily recognizable as such (as, for instance, with the early developments of policy ideas) but, nevertheless, there is no task which a committee does which is not part of the decision-making process. That is its reason for existence; a fact which members and secretaries should keep uppermost in their minds.

8 Committees are established by other bodies or individuals, normally superior in a hierarchical system, or by the whole body of people affected by their decisions (eg a cricket club committee). Their life may vary in length. A standing committee is permanent, an ad hoc committee is set up only for the time needed for the completion of its limited task. The terms of reference of an ad hoc committee are usually very precise, allowing no unforeseen business to creep in through general clauses. Advisory committees have special types of decision-making powers: their decisions are to offer their advice to their parent body (or individual) which decides whether or not to accept and act on it. There are also working parties, panels,

groups which have committee functions in essence.

9 A committee need not have smaller membership than that of its appointing body. There are examples of bodies set up by law with specified composition which have themselves established committees with membership extending far wider than the parent body (eg Education Committee of the ILEA on which all ILEA members sit but form about half the total membership). Sometimes a body whose quorum, rules of procedure and position in the decision-making process are fixed may appoint a committee of the whole of itself. This enables all members to take part in discussions which might otherwise have been restricted to a small committee or constrained by the needs of quorum and rigid procedures. Well-known examples are the House of Commons Committees of the Whole House (some of which are standing committees) and Senate/Academic Board committees which deal with particular functions such as agreeing examination results.

Why do we use committees?

10 Seen purely from the point of view of energy expended autocracy is the most efficient means of making decisions. It is not, however, usually considered to be the most effective method of arriving at the most acceptable decisions and therefore not the most desirable process. Decisions made by one person

or made without consultation do not necessarily involve consideration of all the issues. The knowledge and comprehension of several people are likely to enhance sensible consideration of topics while their predujices will stand some chance of being balanced. In other words, two heads are better than one.

11 Decisions made by single individuals are less likely to have been influenced by consideration of all the relevant issues and - sometimes more important politically - all points of view than those made by a group. A 'better' decision is usually made if the relevant points of view and information can be brought together before the decision is made. Not only is the decision likely to be more complete but the health of the institution will be greater if constant dissension is avoided.

12 By spreading authority to one or more committees more people become involved in decision-making. This increases the available pool of knowledge and experience and is likely to give more people the feeling of contributing to the institution's development. In complex organizations, especially higher education institutions, it is impossible for one body to do all the detailed work. Subsidiary bodies, such as a range of specialist committees, can spread the load and therefore keep pace with the need for decisions to be made.

13 Decisions are therefore more likely to be accepted if people have a chance to influence them and they are seen to be openly arrived at through constitutional channels. It is not necessary for everyone to agree with every decision in order for a healthy organization to exist but the institution will have less tension if the decision-making process is open. Committees therefore provide a balance between reasonable efficiency and practicable consensus.

Who are the members of committees?

14 The composition of the committee is laid down by its appointing body and may, as stated earlier, be by category or by name. Even where a committee comprises named individuals those people will have been chosen for a reason. There are four possible categories of membership: ex officio, elected, nominated and co-opted. A typical academic committee will contain at least the first three categories.

15 A person who has particular responsibilities, who holds a specific office, is a usual category of membership. The Vice-Chancellor or member of the Directorate normally sits on major academic committees simply by virtue of holding that office.

16 People who know something specifically relevant to the work of the committee may be included. They can be thought of as experts. They may have functional

responsibilities and serve ex officio (eg Librarian on a library committee) or may be people who happen to be knowledgeable in a particular field not confined to their own formal post (eg many members of teaching methods committees). Such members may be nominated. Nomination may be specified as an appointing method to ensure that experts are included or it may be a replacement for election from constituencies.

17 The third category of membership is those who represent their fellows. They may be democratically elected or may be nominated by an elected body ie a form of indirect election. Sometimes the constituents 'mandate' their representative thereby subsuming his personal views in those of his nominating body. This is common in student unions and trades unions.

18 Co-option is a method by which the committee itself chooses some of its members. Co-opted members have rights no different in quantity or quality from any other members: the means by which they become members is just different. They are considered for reco-option by the committee itself; it therefore has the option of replacement. If a committee wishes a person to be present for a particular meeting, for example in order to represent

a particular viewpoint, it should invite him to attend. He is not therefore a member and thus has none of the rights of membership (including voting).

19 There is considerable value in staggering the retirement of members so as to provide some assurance of continuity of experience. (This is sometimes a fundamental principle in the phasing of elections eg the US Senate). A sudden influx of members who are unaware of the work of a committee over the previous year or so can put it out of its stride for several meetings until someone (usually the chairman) has done an educational job on the new members. On the other hand it may be a principle fundamental to the system that there is a totally new reflection of the electorate's wishes as , for example, with British general elections.

20 Most committees are unitary: decisions are arrived at by majority of the whole body. This applies even when there are recognized parties as in Parliament and local authorities. There are, however, some bodies which are joint committees on which each of two sides must have a majority of itself in favour for a decision to be carried. These are typically negotiating bodies such as Whitley Councils.

What may members do?

21 All members are expected to participate in the activities of the committee. At a minimum this involves attending meetings having previously read the papers, expressing one's own and one's constituents views when appropriate, and taking part in any voting which proves necessary. In order to be able to fulfil this role effectively a member needs to take the task seriously and to do his homework.

22 A member who has not read the papers, or who has not thought about the subject before, is unlikely to be ready to give a considered view to his fellow members. He may even find himself asking questions which are answered in the papers thereby wasting the time of other members.

23 He should make himself familiar with the constraints on the committee's operation; these include its terms of reference, formal or accepted rules of procedure or standing orders and relevant decisions of superior or related bodies. Subject to the control of the meeting by the chairman a member may ask any relevant question, propose any relevant motion and call for a vote when the discussion is concluded. The normal behaviour of meetings vary - votes being rare in many of them - but the style of operation is determined by the members themselves.

Committee procedure

24 A good deal of committee procedure has been developed informally over the years so that it is possible to talk of 'normal conventions'. These include those aspects of polite civilized behaviour such as members addressing the chair, only one member speaking at a time, and a member who has not yet spoken taking precedence over one who has. The conventions are sometimes codified into rules of procedure or standing orders and often follow rules laid down in formal legislation eg Companies Acts. In general, the more legally constrained the body is the more likely it is to control its operation by formal rules. Even the House of Commons, however, with its formal standing orders, would be unworkable if it did not also rely heavily on conventions. They enable rules of procedure to be interpreted sensibly to reflect changes in political reality.

25 However formally its operation is prescribed a committee may only consider matters within its terms of reference. These are normally laid down by another body (usually a superior one) or in a legal document. Some types of quasi-social committees have terms of reference which are implicit rather than formally stated (eg 'to manage the cricket club') but it is highly undesirable for academic committees to be in a position of not having agreed written terms of reference. The terms of

reference of a polytechnic Academic Board are normally specified in its articles of government; those of a university Senate in its charter and statutes. The Academic Board or Senate normally agrees terms of reference for their committees; and a committee for its sub-committees.

26 Business should be transacted by a reasonable proportion of the members as they are corporately responsible for the actions of the board or committee. What proportion is 'reasonable' is sometimes laid down as a quorum without which a meeting may not proceed. The more formal a body the more likely it is that a quorum will be specified; the larger a formal body the smaller proportion of its membership required. Quorum should be simple to calculate, simple to understand, seen to be fair and enable business to be transacted expeditiously but not by a 'cabal'. In other words, it should be of a sufficient size to engender trust among the members and those affected by their decisions. Where a committee does not have a quorum laid down there is no constitutional reason why it may not conduct its business with a very low attendance. Common sense will usually prevail in deciding whether the meeting should take place.

27 A committee discusses and makes decisions on items of which members should

have previous indication. This presupposes the existence of an agenda paper listing the issues to be considered. Each item is discussed in order and a decision made on it before the next item is reached.

28 Terms of reference and decisions of the appointing body should make clear on which items a committee may itself decide completely and on which it shall recommend its conclusions to a superior body. These should be indicated in the papers for the meeting. It reports its recommendations to the superior body for decision, and normally its major decisions for information.

29 Some committees conduct their business in a very formal fashion with decisions being based on motions, moved, seconded, put and voted upon. Academic committees tend to be more relaxed in their behaviour but nonetheless formal in process. A decision can be based on a recommendation in a committee document without the need for a member specifically to move a motion embodying the thoughts in the document. The chairman controls the meeting, ensuring that the committee acts solely within its terms of reference. He should try to establish an atmosphere conducive to reasonable discussion and to ensure that all views are heard.

32 Occasionally it is necessary for the chairman to act on behalf of the committee in deciding something which might otherwise have come to a full meeting. Chairman's action is taken on behalf of the committee but is subject to subsequent ratification. Individual chairman and committees themselves vary in the extent to which chairman's action is politically acceptable. Chairman's action is not usually mentioned in constitutional documents but, if it is, it is usually limited to matters which are minor, routine or urgent. These categories are the conventional ones which accord with common sense. Constitutionally, chairman's action is only not allowable if it is specifically precluded by standing orders or decisions of the committee or appointing body.
(That which is not ultra vires is intra vires).

33 A well organized committee has a written agenda paper with supporting papers circulated sufficiently early before the meeting to enable members to read, think and talk about it. Its meetings will be conducted efficiently with decisions being made clearly so that members not only know to what they are agreeing but the secretary can record them accurately. If necessary the secretary should ask for clarification of the committee's decion. This helps avoid the situation of members disputing the accuracy of minutes or, in

effect, having the decision changed. The minutes are the offical and legally accepted record of the committee's decisions which are confirmed by the committee at its next meeting. The extent to which minutes contain a summary of discussion varies from one organization to another.

34 It is the secretary's job to write the minutes and any reports to other bodies. These are normally scrutinized by the chairman who may wish to make minor changes. If good trust and understanding exist between them few changes will be needed.

Committee servicing

35 In order to be effective, efficient and orderly committees need administrative support from a secretary. 'Committee servicing' is the term normally used to denote the service provided by the secretary to the committee both as individual members and as a corporate body. It is important to remember that service should be provided for the individual member as the maintenance of good contact between individuals and the secretary can be of great benefit to members in pursuing topics in more depth than is contained in the papers. Unless the constitution provides otherwise the secretary is not a member of the committee.

36 At its simplest committee servicing comprises

a arranging meetings of the committee, including booking and organizing rooms and ordering refreshments

b drawing up the agenda paper in consultation with the chairman

c preparing and circulating papers to members

d attending the meetings

e advising the committee on procedure

f recording the committee's decisions in the minutes

g initiating resultant action

37 It is only a simple task, however, if there are other officers responsible for thinking about the content of the committee's business. Academic organizations rely heavily for committee servicing on the professional knowledge and competence of a few administrative staff, mostly in the Registry or Secretariate, who are expected to be completely familiar with the aims and objectives of the committee as embodied in its terms of reference and its own and other bodies' decisions. They are expected to think about the work of the committee so that matters which are within its scope are developed and brought to it. They are required not only to know the committee's

procedure but to understand why it exists so that advice given to the committee and to other people is accurate and sensitive to the particular situation. All this presupposes that the secretary maintains frequent consultation with the chairman, understands the committee's relationship with other bodies and develops a professional commitment to the purpose of the committee even if it is not of burning personal interest to him.

38 Committee papers do not write themselves nor, unfortunately, do they usually appear on the committee secretary's desk in a form suitable and complete enough for the committee to make decisions. New topics, and even well-worn ones, need to be put into context with an examination of the constraints relating to any problems if the committee is to be able to use its time efficiently. An important aspect of committee servicing is therefore the ability to be able to delve into a topic, guided by the chairman if necessary, so that information, argument and proposals are presented for members in a manner which they can understand and which takes account of any relevant known viewpoints or academic criteria without any bias or prejudice being displayed. In other words, facts need to be organized and evaluated constraints relating to any problem examined, possible proposals or conclusions suggested, and the implications of likely decisions drawn

to the committee's attention.

39 Arranging meetings sounds a simple clerical task, and so it is if properly thought about. An inordinate amount of time is wasted by members at the end of meetings, or by clerical staff afterwards, arranging dates of meetings convenient to a majority of members at short notice. A well organized publicized calendar of meetings agreed in advance enables diaries to be kept, rooms booked, coffees or teas ordered and paperwork planned with the minimum of waste of time and energy. A small amount of thought about committee meetings as inter-locking cogs in a decision-making machine can save a lot of friction.

40 It is the committee secretary's responsibility to ensure that the meeting can physically take place. He should therefore ensure that the room is properly provided with suitable furniture; that heating, lighting and ventilation are adequate; that refreshments will be provided for the right number of people at a suitable time; and that any invited visitors or deputations are given suitable information about venue, time, place to wait etc.

41 Getting papers to members on time should be easy but often proves more difficult than anticipated or desired. Some rules of procedure state a deadline for the agenda to be sent to members. If no such

constraint exists the committee secretary has to balance the need of the committee for information and topics to be brought to committee speedily with the efficient preparation and circulation of papers. A committee which meets twice or three times a term should expect to be able to receive papers at least five working days in advance to give members time to read and discuss them with colleagues before the meeting. The time lapse between final agreement of the agenda with the chairman will depend on various factors not least of which is the speed of typing, duplication and circulation of papers.

42 The committee secretary acts as a focal point for contact between the committee and other people. This is particularly true if the chairman is not engaged in that activity full-time. The secretary is not only more accessible but his responsibility to the committee means that he will be the natural person for others to turn to for information and procedural advice. Although the chairman is responsible for ensuring that the committee makes decisions and that they are implemented it falls to the secretary to initiate much of that implementation. He therefore becomes the source and recipient of communication between the committee and those affected by its decisions. Close contact with the chairman is obviously important in ensuring that the tone and strength of the decisions are conveyed accurately. Good perception

by the secretary of the committee's wishes will enhance rapport with the chairman. This will, in its turn, lead to greater mutual confidence, competence and efficient use of discussion time.

43 Perhaps the most difficult aspect of committee servicing is the proferring of advice. The committee secretary is particularly vulnerable in meetings where it may be necessary for him, in public and with no notice, to answer questions on procedure, on past decisions of the committee, the effect of likely committee decisions, and on relevant matters in the scope of other bodies. At least if he is asked for advice the committee is likely to be receptive to what he says. There are times, however, when the drift of discussion necessitates advice being tendered unrequested (normally to be done via the chairman). An experienced committee secretary will learn to judge the mood of the commitee, and particularly of the chairman, perceiving when the time is ripe for him to provide the restraint of facts, whether procedural or otherwise. This is the most subtle of the techniques of committee servicing, dependent to a large extent on the personality of the secretary, the chairman and the flavour of the committee. It can only be learned by experience so, as it can only be practised in full view of members, it is vital for the future trust between members and the secretary

that he knows his facts, presenting them clearly and concisely. Well-timed accurate advice can assist a committee immeasurably, preventing the seed of an unworkable or unconstitutional decision from being germinated. Maintenance of the reputation of the committee, in its own and others' opinion, assists academic health.

44 The whole purpose of committee servicing is to help members to make decisions. They are involved in a great many activities and are busy. The optimum amount of well presented information, both at and outside meetings, will assist them to make the best decisions they can. Assembly of information is most effectively done by one person. A permanent secretariat provides an opportunity for full and consistent assembly of information for all items of business and for their relationships to be drawn together. In addition, as academic committees are normally part of a large system requiring their work to be related to other parts of the system, a permanent secretariat maximizes the chance of these relationships being maintained and understood.

45 In summary, adequate servicing enables the committee to meet, to know what it is to discuss and why, to make decisions, and to have them carried out.

Agenda preparation

46 An agenda is a list of things to be done or, in the context of meetings, items of business to be considered. The items may be:

a headings for individuals to introduce

b motions to debate

c policy papers to consider

d material to receive for information

The conclusion of all consideration will be a decision of one type or another.

47 It is the secretary's job to draw up and issue the agenda in good time before the meeting. Rules of procedure may determine the timing and even the order of items. If there are no rules convention applies. Nothing may appear on an agenda which is outside the terms of reference of the committee. In the final analysis the chairman may rule that an item should be included but a wise chairman will normally heed sensible advice from an authoritative and experienced secretary.

48 Convention suggests that a meeting can only proceed once it has been properly constituted. Accordingly, the receipt of information relating to terms of reference, compostion and membership must take precedence. (In meetings which record

apologies for absence an item for this should appear early in the agenda). The election of a chairman can follow. Any directives from the appointing body affecting the committee's procedure should appear before any substantive business.

49 The first substantive item should be the confirmation of the minutes of the previous meeting so far as is practicable. It is sometimes not possible, due to closeness of meetings, for the minutes to be ready; in this case they should be presented to the next convenient meeting. Bodies which exceptionally hold special meetings to consider a single topic normally defer the minutes of the previous (ordinary) meeting to the next one although this is not universally the case.

50 'Matters arising from the minutes' should appear as a separate item. This helps the chairman and members to separate the two processes of approval of the accuracy of the minutes (which concludes the business of the previous meeting) from raising new points on old topics (which constitutes new business).

51 The remaining items will come from various sources depending on the nature of the committee, the people involved, academic structure, external relations and time. Some committees receive much of their

business from other committees. This is typical of Senates and Academic Boards. Others have a primary function, dealting with topics at an initial stage. The secretary of the former will tend to receive complete self-contained reports which need only to be put into a suitable order for use. The secretary of the latter may be presented with an unworked idea which requires considerable discussion with its originator before it is ready to be presented in writing to a meeting. For some committees an institutional system will ensure that topics are presented to it eg budget preparation, course approval. On the other hand there are committees which deal mainly with individual, unsystematized, matters which may be raised by individuals (particularly senior people and members) or generated as matters of principle by Senate or Academic Board. Members who take particular interest in certain aspects of the committee's work may often volunteer, or be persuaded, 'to jot down on half a sheet of paper' the essence of a new topic which appeared tangentially from another discussion. A new item has thus been born.

52 For many committees there is no easily identifiable source of material. For some this results from the terms of reference being narrow or transitory: there may be no need for a permanent committee at all. For others it is the product of an institutional lacuna in that another institution with a relevant professional officer would find that he would generate much of the committee's business. The

committee secretary is therefore responsible for turning his general awareness of the committee's need into written papers. This can in fact provide great stimulation for the committee secretary especially in the early days of a new committee before it builds up momentum.

53 Some committees allow 'any other business' to appear on their agendas. There are two views of this. The first is that all members should know in advance what topics are to be discussed so that they can think about them beforehand. A member who is unable to attend knows what it being discussed in his absence and therefore for what he is accepting corporate responsibility. This view does not therefore allow the inclusion of AOB on the agenda. The contrary view is that every member should have the right to raise any relevant topic. If a member wishes to do so he has the opportunity to notify the secretary beforehand thus having his item placed on the agenda with suitable documentary support. The only valid reason for considering matters which are not on the agenda is if they are major, urgent and will suffer by delay. An agenda item 'chairman's announcements' is often used to cover the need to convey urgent information and to give the chairman discretion to introduce a major urgent item for decision.

54 The order of items on an agenda is determined partly by the need to complete the business of the previous meeting before starting the current one; and partly by the need to help members make optimum use of the available time. Apart from the formal requirements of procedural items and minutes already mentioned there are no hard and fast rules about order. The chairman's preference, the attendance of visitors, the likely length of discussion and the relative urgency of certain items will affect the order.

55 It is a convention that items deferred from the previous meeting are taken immediately after the minutes and constitutional matters. Occasionally, however, the meeting may be more efficiently conducted by grouping them with other related items. An item which will affect abother must appear before the one affected. Topics which are related are best grouped together so that members do not have to dart about from one theme to another and back. Grouping similar topics can save a great deal of time and unnecessary confusion.

56 Items for active decision can be separated from those purely for information. They may even be separately headed 'for information', 'for decision'. Views vary as to the benefits to be gained from placing routine or uncontentious items before those likely to generate debate or vice versa. Protagonists of early placing of uncontentious items argue that such

location enables much of the business to be dealt with speedily as members wish to press on to the interesting topics. They argue that the routine items do not get deferred to later meetings and that members are not bored by them if they appear early. Similarly quorum us less likely to be lost if major topics appear last. Those holding the opposite view suggest that members tend to be fresh at the start of meetings so are more likely to raise points on what were thought to be uncontentious topics if they appear early. This delays consideration of major subjects which may have to be deferred of dealt with at specially summoned adjourned meetings due to lack of quorum and/or time. Meetings can take longer if contentious items appear at the end. The views are probably evely balanced. The only solution it to re-emphasize the difference in flavour and style between one committee and another much of which depends on the quality of chairmanship. The structure of agenda which produces an hour and a half meeting for one committee may lead to one twice as long for another. Despite this some committees suffer from Parkinson's Law: however carefully the agenda is structured the meeting always last the same (long) time!

57 There are some ways of helping members restrain their verbosity and confusion. Putting a finishing time on the agenda can have a remarkable effect: so can an indication of the time when a visitor

has been invited. The rules of some meetings only allow discussion on certain items, usually with members' right to notify in advance their wish to discuss other specified items. Above all the chairman will have to control the meetings so it is his preference for agenda order of which account should be taken.

58 This presupposes consultation with the chairman. Chairmen, like other mortals, vary. Most, but not all, wish to be consulted before the agenda is drawn up and will wish to see, or to know about, the supporting documents. Sometimes the rapport between the chairman and the secretary is so good that the agenda can be drawn up by the secretary in the confidence that the chairman will be happy with the order. (This can, of course, be a product of laziness or lack of interest on the part of the chairman: secretary beware!)

59 Whatever consultation has occurred earlier it is advisable for the chairman and secretary to meet before the meeting for briefing. It is in both their interests. The chairman may need to be guided through complex documents (however well written) so that he is fully aware of the type of discussion likely and the type of decision required; he will certainly need reminding of the timing implication of decisions; lastly he may need to discuss procedure with the secretary. A good chairman will be aware of the subtleties of the meeting

and will want to ensure that the secretary understands them. The secretary may be asked to provide additional information for the chairman or to invite extra advisors to attend. For this reason it is best to hold the briefing at least half a day before the meeting. It is the secretary's responsibility to arrange the time. It helps the secretary understand the conduct of the meeting if the chairman discusses any political aspects he expects the meeting to display. More scrupulous note-taking is often needed in a highly contentions, politically sensitive situation. Briefing is part of the teamwork which should exist between chairman and secretary. For both it is essential that they are soaked in the subjects before the meeting actually takes place.

Apparent disasters

60 An inexperienced or flappable chairman or secretary can be thrown by apparent disasters in the organization or conduct of meetings. They need not be. Nothing that happens in a meeting, however fraught it may appear at first, is ever irresoluble. If the room is occupied move to another; if no coffee arrives either have none or order it during the meeting. If a member has not received his agenda give him a copy at the meeting. For this purpose always have spares available. With any of these problems the secretary should reach calmly at the time but check

afterwards what had gone wrong in order to avoid repetition. Members need not even be aware of some troubles with which the secretary has coped.

61 However well the chairman and secretary have arranged the agenda in advance there are sometimes changes in the order sought or late papers presented. Such events may be created by the chairman or secretary (usually with little resistance from members) or by a member (with variable amounts of resistance by the chairman). A chairman who has been involved in ordering the agenda should be able to use his discretion wisely in deciding whether the request for change in the order is reasonable; if so, he should accede to the request.

62 Dealing with late papers is more difficult. It is sloppy practice to have papers laid on the table, whether or no they were listed on the agenda, but it cannot always be avoided. If a late paper will assist decision-making a wise chairman will allow it to be received, giving a few minutes for members to read it. However, a long and major paper should be accepted only in very exceptional circumstances because it is unfair to give members present too little time to digest its contents and those not present will suffer from the same discrimination as applied to AOB. If the chairman is in any doubt about the wisdom of allowing a late paper to be considered he should quickly balance

in his own mind the likely effect it will have on the efficiency of the meeting and announce his decision immediately. When in doubt a constitutionalist would advise that late papers should not be considered. The most important response to such a request is that the chairman make a quick, clear and firm decision. He should not allow the meeting to get embroiled in a long debate on such a topic. The 'adoption of the agenda' - an agenda item much seen in international political organizations - probably stems from underlying anxieties about the balance of power. In meetings where trust exists between all members, including the chairman, the chairman's authority in such matters is unlikely to be questioned.

63 It may not matter if a meeting runs over its expected finishing time but the chairman and cohesive members will keep exactly to the expected time. A gentle reminder from the chair will normally kerb long-windedness - for a time at least. If a meeting appears to be running out of time the secretary should draw the chairman's attention to those items which are urgent, and if possible, those which are routine and will take little time. (Briefing should help here). This will help the chairman in advising the meeting of the effect of staying a bit longer or deferring items to another meeting. If topics are deferred they can either be dealt with

at an adjourned meeting (a continuation of the original one) or at the next ordinary meeting. Circumstances will dictate which is preferable.

64 If quorum is lost at a meeting it can no longer continue. The effect is the same as running out of time. In either case chairman's action is occasionally feasible but political sensitivity is needed. A meeting which lacks quorum at the start can only be deferred completely to another time or cancelled. A meeting which lacks a quorum can sometimes be constituted as a group of members advising the chairman. Based on members' comments the chairman can often take chairman's action on urgent matters and be certain of subsequent formal committee support. Good political judgement of the temper of the committee is required when this is suggested.

65 Invited visitors present one type of problem; uninvited ones another. Those who are invited to advise the meeting or as a deputation should be told when their item is expected to be reached, where they should wait and what form their section of the meeting will take. Advisers normally remain in the meeting when the decision is made; deputations do not. Some meetings are open to non-members who should sit away from the committee. (This is so that those who are corporately responsible for decisions are identifiable). Unless the rules allow it they should not take part in the meeting. In a closed meeting the

chairman must exercise his discretion in deciding how firm to be in persuading a non-member to leave. This is particularly true if disruption occurs. Whatever he decides he must do it quickly and clearly, preferably in accordance with the sense of the committee (if any is discernible). The secretary can often avoid any unpleasantness being caused by speaking to any unexpected attenders before the meeting starts.

66 In summary, a well-run meeting depends greatly on the chairman who is responsible for ensuring that everything goes right; that the agenda is sensibily ordered and kept to in circumstances conducive to good decision-making. The secretary in fact does most of this work - with little or no thanks. He has to accept responsibility for all that goes wrong even though disasters may not have been of his own fault. Quiet unobtrusive efficiency on the part of the chairman and secretary leads to productive decision-making.

d what form the decision is to be

70 Different Committees may be asked to do different things with apparently similar material. For instance, the role of a faculty board is different in scope from that of an institution-wide resources committee in relation to the allocation of resources. Even basically the same material may need a slightly different emphasis for one faculty from another. A committee which has had a particular topic under consideration for several meetings probably does not need the same kind of summary of the facts and issues as the Academic Board/Senate would need in order to make a final decision.

71 The committee normally knows less about the details of the topic than the report writer but individual members will often have a deeper appreciation of their importance. This is particularly true of a new report writer so it is very important to provide as many relevant facts as possible so that the members can use them on which to base their arguments and decisions. A more experienced report writer is likely to be able to anticipate which aspects of the topic will be most controversial. He may therefore be able to deal with some of the likely discussion in the report itself although he must be careful not to be seen to be influencing its outcome unduly.

72 If the committee is not discussing the topic for the first time, reference should be made to the previous discussion. This should be done by referring to and usually re-stating the actual minute or else time can be wasted in trying to track down what was actually decided. Most often it will be necessary to summarize all of the relevant previous documentation.

73 Many reports are self-contained but some will be more useful if other documents are appended or referred to. The information presented in the report may need to be put into context eg by reference to the academic plan, or a decision of another committee. Often the most economical and efficient way to provide maximum relevant information is to summarize or attach copies of appropriate correspondence. This is particularly true of reports on subjects which have continued for several meetings when it is important to give details from previous meetings.

74 It is not the job of the report writer to make the decision. It <u>is</u> his job though to guide the committee into taking a particular type of action. The committee might, for instance

a agree a recommendation

b give observations to another body

c receive observations from other body/ies and do something with them

d note a report and do nothing with it

e seek further information

f issue instructions

g settle a dispute

All of these are types of decision.

75 These types of decision can be grouped into three main categories:

a it can finish with the topic itself - this is only possible if the matter is completely within the terms of reference of the committee and is delegated to it. Sometimes matters which are reported purely for information (and which may never get further than the committee) may form part of the background to topics which will appear in other guises and on which further action may be taken later.

b it can seek further information before it makes its next move - this may be prompted by four needs:

i insufficient information which could reasonably have been anticipated by the report writer;

ii information required as a result of the drift of the discussion and which could

not reasonably have been foreseen;

iii requirement that consultation take place often to gain support rather than information);

iv the topic was at an interim stage

c it can pass the topic on to another body - this results from the conclusion of consideration of a topic as far as the terms of reference of the committee are concerned when the topic is being passed 'upwards', or may result from preliminary hearing and decision in principle when passed 'downwards' through the structure.

76 The report should make clear to the committee which type of decision is required, or is feasible, as far as it is practicable to do so. Clearly this means that the writer must be thoroughly familar with the terms of reference and procedures of this committee and related committees, and with references from a superior committee.

77 Before starting to write, the report-writer should assemble his information and work out a plan of what the committee needs to know and what type of decision it is expected to make. He should be clear about the objectives of the document before he writes it: this will avoid superfluity.

78 Comprehension is assisted by the use of simple language and short sentences. Complex thoughts should be divided into separate clauses. Brackets, colons and semi-colons help the sense flow in complicated and related thoughts. Uncommon abbreviations are best used only after the full title has appeared first. Styles vary but on the whole short words are preferable to long ones; those in current use better than archaic ones. This is not to decry the demonstration of a wide vocabulary but merely to emphasize that the report must be understood if it is to be useful.

79 Starting a new thought requires a new paragraph. Paragraphs should be reasonably short so that they are easy to read and to locate on the paper later. Paragraphs should be numbered in accordance with house style. The two systems most commonly found are the continuous (start at 1 and go on irrespective of the number of sub-topics) and the decimal (each complete topic has a cardinal number of which sub-topics appear as sub-sections of 1.41 or 1 d i). Each has its value but, while the decimal system is more logical, it is easier in discussion to refer to paragraph 142 than to paragraph 6.5.7. Whichever system is used clarity and consistency are important.

80 Long reports can appear daunting to the reader. He can be reassured by stating at the beginning what the report is about with conclusions in brief and what the committee is expected to do with it. A summary of the evidence at the end can help the reader to endorse the final conclusion and recommendation. Use of headings and different typefaces physically help the reader to find his way through a long document. Appending relevant supporting papers, especially tables or charts, is useful in dividing the main thesis from its background or evidence.

81 Documents should be identifiable preferably by a classification system. Again house styles vary. The variables include

reference code for the committee
reference code or name of the author
number of meeting
year of meeting
number of document in series

The system chosen will probably depend on whether the report is thought of as belonging to the committee to which it is addressed or to the person/section by whom it was written.

82 Documents should be clearly typed with a layout designed to be efficient to type (centred headings take at least twice as long as those ranged left), efficient to read (type neither too small nor too feint), and efficient to file(margins

wide enough for hole-punching). Pages should be numbered. For ease of handling (in meetings and in files) the paper should be of the same size. International size A4 is the most usual now. For economy both sides of the paper should be used where possible.

Minutes

83 Minutes are the formal record of the committee's decisions. They are quasi-legal documents so must be accurate, clear and unambiguous. They are usually written by the secretary, scrutinized by the chairman and confirmed as correct at a subsequent meeting of the committee. They exist because members and others need to know what was decided, by whom, on the basis of what information and in order that there is acceptable evidence of the decisions of the meeting.

84 Styles of minute-writing vary. Proper sentences are less ambiguous and more easily understood than brief phrases but some organizations are happy with tersely phrased minutes. The extent to which the drift of discussion is recorded will vary according to house style, the sensitivity of the topic, the nature of the meeting and the completeness of the supporting documents. In general, as minutes are records of decisions, the trend of discussions only need be recorded in order to support an interim decision or one which was contentious and

requires supporting explanation.

85 Ideally each minute, together with any supporting papers, should be self-contained so that it is intelligible without reference to other documents. At the time of recording this may not appear important but, as they are the official permanent record, they must be intelligible in the future.

86 Minutes must be objective, concise and accurate. The authorship should not be apparent from the style of writing or layout so consistency of style is important. This particularly applies where there is a group of people servicing a collection of committees. This presupposes a house style.

87 Minutes should contain the following elements:

a clear identification of the meeting; which committee, which meeting, when held, who was present in what role. (Large bodies do not always list the attendance as individual responsibility is less important).

b each topic separately minuted with its document clearly identified in a manner consistent with house style (eg number of document). It is often helpful to have a few words indicating the content (in some house styles this might be covered by the title of the paper).

c if necessary a brief indication of significant points made in discussion and which contributed to the decision. This is the least important part of the minutes but it may be an indication that a topic was the subject of extensive discussion.

d clear unambiguous record of decisions. This is the most important section.

88 There are certain key verbs which appear in minutes:

received	- this should be used for the formal receipt of a document by the committee. A document which has not been received cannot be considered
considered	- this should be used to denote that the committee discussed the particular topic
considered that	- this may be used to express the committee's feeling or opinion which led to a particular conclusion
noted	- this should be used to list points of particular interest arising from a paper or a discussion
agreed/ resolved	- (difference is house style only). This should be used

to show the conclusion of the committee's deliberation. It introduces the final decision on a matter wholly within the competence of the committee. Many house styles have the verb underlined or in capitals for emphasis and ease of location of decision.

recommended - analogous to agreed/resolved for matters requiring decision by a higher body.

89 The style and layout of minutes should follow the same principles as in reports. Minutes must be clear so the layout should make it easy to see

a identification of meeting and membership

b where a new item starts - by use of headings

c where a new element in the item starts - by sensible use of numbered paragraphs

d where a single decision incorporates several aspects - by use of sub-paragraphs

If a decision is very long it is often clearer to present the major material as an appendix. Permanent understanding is helped by minimal use of abbreviations as they may change their meaning or cease to be in common use. As in reports, un-

common abbreviations are best used only after the full title has appeared first, preferably near to the original reference.

90 Good minutes are based on good documentations and on sensible notetaking. The minute-writer must be able to understand his notes even if some time has elapsed since the meeting. Each secretary will have his own style of notetaking but a few general tips are helpful to the novice

a notes should identify the meeting and who was present. Items should be numbered to correspond with the agenda or documents and, where appropriate, specific paragraphs.

b the documents for the meeting should make clear what kind of decision is expected and may even contain specific recommendations. A brief note (document or item number - noted, agreed, referred to X) will be sufficient background for the minute-writer in short clear-cut items.

c more complicated decisions cannot be forecast so easily. There is no need to note every contribution to discussion unless the decision will be to send a summary of views to another body. Significant trends in the discussion should be noted and

the decision must be carefully recorded. The more experienced the minute-writer is the fewer notes he is likely to take as he develops an awareness of the relative significance of points made in discussion.

d the decision must be accurately recorded. It is sometimes necessary to ask the chairman that the resolution be written by the proposer; the minute-writer should not be embarrassed to make such a request.

91 There is a certain amount of skill in translating notes into minutes which is learned with practice. The secretary should try not to leave too long between the meeting and writing the minutes because however accurate the notes are, the relative significance of difference aspect fades from memory. It is also good practice for the chairman and members to have the minutes soon after the meeting as they are unlikely to have an accurate record of the decisions. As with report writing it is necessary to have all the papers for the meeting available when writing the minutes. Notes cannot be translated into minutes without reference to the documents. It helps if the secretary thinks himself into the position of someone who was not present. Minutes should be written clearly so that a stranger could understand what was decided, on what basis, and by whom.

92 The minutes must be approved by the chairman before being sent to members. If he suggests changes in the draft, the secretary should take note of them so long as the changes do not affect the constitutionality of the decision. It is sensible to discuss the minutes with the chairman because he may be less aware than the secretary of the relative importance of different sections of a particular minute and may not insist on a change once he realizes its inapplicability. However, he may be must more aware than the secretary of the importance of detailed wording of a particular item. A good relationship between chairman and secretary should enable minute-writing and approval to be calm and without stress.

93 It is important to distinguish between the decisions and their implementations. It should be clear who is responsible for carrying out decisions, be they secretary, chairman, member or other person. The first action is for the secretary to ensure that those responsible for action are aware of this duty and its nature. Some chairmen wish to be involved in deciding the details of implementation but most are satisfied with a clear indication from the secretary of the type of action and responsibility for it. Some house styles include this information in the margin of the minutes; others favour the use of a separate action sheet. The exact form of action will naturally depend on the

nature of the decision but will usually take the form of written communications, telephone and personal discussion, finding out information, writing papers, and a good deal of thought. It is important that it is accorded high priority as there is no point in having meetings if their decisions are not carried out.